

Journey to I Am: Aiding the Process of Self-Identity Investigation in College Students

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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April 2018

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2018

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Abstract

The process of finding one's own personal identity can be a long and difficult process. However, since college tends to be the first exposure most young adults get with opinion variant of their own, it can be the perfect time to investigate, develop, and establish one's own personal beliefs. Seeing that many students do not begin this process with intentionality until they are well into their college experience, this project was a jump start for participating individuals. By establishing and providing a variety of short, free assessments, attendees were given the opportunity to investigate their own current mindset as well as learn more about the mindsets of others. This process was done through access to the assessments as well as a visual and tactical task.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Robbie Williford for his constant outpour of support and accountability within this project as well as outside of it. This project was only one of many that he gave guidance on and I have come to hold his opinions and words in a place of utmost respect and admiration.

I would also like to thank Andrew for his encouragement and accountability in the completion of this project.

Process Analysis Statement and Written Portion of Thesis Program:

A Combination

The journey an individual begins when coming to college is very personal and unique. For most people, college is the first time that they are living away from home and are being given the opportunity to make their own decisions about what they do with their time. For instance, this might be the first opportunity they have to actually handle their own laundry, or the first time waking themselves up for class or for meetings. It might even be the first time that they have full control over their diet and what types of foods (and in what quantity) they want to consume. However, many people do not realize that this transition into individuality can be just as mental as it is physical, and that the journey is not always as straightforward as it may seem.

When entering college, a person is placed in an environment that is free of the same influences they were raised with. Lee (2002) says "The environment and personal experiences within the environment can directly influence individual beliefs." This is basically saying that people are impressionable, and the experiences they have had while submersed in any given environment helped to shape them into who they are. Therefore, if an individual has only existed within one primary environment, their values and identities are then derived from that environment. This means that even if they attend a university that upholds similar beliefs or behaviors as their childhood community, they are still placed in an area where they are surrounded by many more factors and influences that they now have to sort through. Many of those who enter college find themselves having strayed from their various beliefs and customs because they were no longer being encouraged to participate in them. There has been a heavy

shift over the years of students who have entered college and who have ended up identifying as non religious, or having no religious affiliation (Hastings & Hoge, 1976). So why does this happen? Is there a reason that many students change their beliefs once entering college?

The process of changing one's ideals or even trying something new and then returning to the familiar is a natural process of life. As children, we start off very curious and tend to explore a lot of different activities. In this phase, it is considered a part of growing up, and since many children end up exploring and then conforming to the expectations they were already held to, it does seem more like a childhood trend and not a conscious choice. If this happens to an individual in high school, it is usually regarded as a phase and not seen as permanent; this is because the individual is still in their raised environment and therefore still has the external pressure to assimilate. If a child decides to dress in a gothic manner while living in a more traditional area, for example, people may be concerned, but ultimately they will say that this person will grow out of it. And they usually do, because there is so much external pressure to live up to the traditional standards in order to be successful.

However, once you take an individual and place them in a new location, full of new ideas, the pressures placed on them have changed, and simply falling back on what they have always learned is no longer a coping mechanism that can help them to blend in. Hadaway and Roof conducted a study in 1988 that found that "Higher education tends to expand one's horizons and may also mean greater exposure to counter-cultural values. For many persons, such exposure has worked to erode traditional plausibility structures, which maintained the poorly understood religious convictions that seem so typical of American religion" (p. 36). Essentially, exposure to other ideas and beliefs about the world tends to cause a person to second guess their own views,

especially if they have not put any thought into the other ideas before. Once a person starts to second guess their views they either learn more about other ideas and decide to stick with their original, or they decide they agree more with another thought process.

All of this is to say that when students enter college, or really any major location change that removes them from their comfort zone, they are forced to take a look at what they really believe. The “group think” that can oftentimes plague families is no longer present; “group think” meaning the concept of affirmation only conversations so that once one idea has been brought up, no one speaks out against it or with ways to improve upon it. Because this environment is gone, the student is now experiencing the freedom to see what all is out there, and more importantly, what they feel they believe for themselves. This is a slow process, and not always an intentional one, but it is a necessary part of life because it breeds assurance in one’s own ideals and helps that person to piece together what they see as their identity.

As a freshman, I embarked on this journey of self-identity with absolutely no road map and no idea of what I was doing. My life, up until college, was very structured. I had parental influences, peer influences, teacher influences and the like. All of these forces joined to create an identity that I model myself after. This behavior allowed me to be successful during my time in that environment. Meaning, I was able to meet expectations, accomplish goals set for me, and earn accolades awarded for such desired behavior. However, once I left home, I found myself in a completely new environment, and those around me did not have “universal criteria” for how they expected me to conduct myself. Nor did those around me fit the script that I had become accustomed to expecting of others. So I began to unravel. Not intentionally at first, but more like a ball of yarn rolling down a hill: a slight lean, which led to a gradual tumble, which escalated to

a full speed roll. I had been wound up by my environment for so long that in order to see who I really was under all of the years of conditioning, I was going to have to unwrap every single layer.

To my surprise, this was a far more painful process than I had expected, and even now, in my senior year, I keep finding areas that I have yet to explore for myself and to find my own opinions on. But it has been the gentle nudging of friends and the eye opening conversations I have had with others that have served as a catalyst for this process. It is for this reason that I knew I wanted to execute my thesis in a way that helped students to begin their journey of self realization and self expression.

As a communication major, we learn about the perceptions that your surroundings give you and refer to them in reference to a person's "story lived." This term comes from research done by Pearce and Cronen in the mid 1970s. These researchers came up with the theory of the Coordinated Management of Meaning, or CMM for short. In this theory, Pearce and Cronen discuss how every interaction in a person's past has influence over their interactions in the future. For instance, if someone has had a family member involved in a school shooting, they may make future choices that favor stricter gun policies. This is of course not a statement of causation, simply a guide to understanding why individuals tend to think and react the way they do.

Pearce and Cronen go on to outline certain responsibilities now placed on the reader after learning about this theory, and the calls to action that this knowledge includes. Some of the specific ones that inspired this project were:

- “Develop sufficient self-awareness of the “localness” of your own stories to treat other peoples’ stories with curiosity and respect...
- “Develop abilities to think in terms of patterns, relationships, and systems, not just in terms of specific acts, your own intentions, and the way the world appears from your own perspective...
- “Realizing that you as a person are made by the same process that you are a part of making, be committed to improving existing social worlds, preventing the realization of unwanted social worlds, and calling into being better social worlds” (Pearce, 2005, pg 51).

In essence, these takeaways told me that there is a need to understand where you are coming from, how it has shaped you, but to also take control of who you are and to start to understand what has shaped others and to let that knowledge influence your life as well. Since this process is usually more gradual and takes immense time and effort, I wanted to try to create a catalyst for students that would jumpstart their thought processes in a number of the categories that usually become a point of interest in their lives.

To start this process I wanted to make sure that I understood the various areas that a student’s environment most heavily influenced them in. Based on my own life examples, and the experiences my friends had shared with me previously, I knew that three big areas of influence were religion, politics, and sexual expression. With each of these areas, I wanted to find at least one quiz that students could engage with to both learn a little bit more about the different ideas that are out there; as well as to start the process of questioning what it is they actually believe themselves.

The first major area, religion, is a very interesting topic when looking at a person's belief system and how they arrived to it, as well as if they leave it. Close relationships with parental figures tend to increase the amount of lasting impact of religious beliefs and activities, resulting in a greater change for long term involvement in religious behavior (Mayrl & Uecker, 2011). Because of this, many families use religion as a way to bond and create that tight knit community between one another. And by doing so, when students come to college from this environment, it creates an interesting journey for them. They start to explore their religion on their own and start to also be immersed in a community that has many different religions and religious ideals instead of just one. As indicated above, the more firm the religious foundation, the greater chance there is for a student to maintain their childhood faith. However, when a student enters college without a firm and internalized set of beliefs, it can be difficult for them to navigate their own beliefs in terms of spirituality. This is because the student has no firm roots so every new idea they are introduced to causes an upset in their mentality of what is correct. Suddenly the concepts they have been able to grow into are being challenged and they have to discover their own beliefs.

As I set out to locate a resource that would help in this area I ran into a large amount of tests and article quizzes that would provide results based on the answers provided, but would leave the participant with only their results and no information as to what they meant. Seeing as how the purpose of the activity is to foster growth and an appetite to learn more, I wanted to find something that would not only provide each participant with their results, but that would also give them resources to look into what those results meant. The goal was to find a website or two, that could use a quiz to increase the individual's interest, but could then provide them with the much needed support on their investigative journey.

After some research, I was able to find three sites that I could use in conjunction to get my desired results. The first site, FindMyReligion.com, has both the quick quiz and the short description of different belief systems and would serve as a great introduction to the concept of religion. This site provides a quiz of 21 questions that go through different ideas about god, life after death, life's purpose, and so on. The results provide each participant with a rundown of how their personal answers regarding their beliefs match up to known religions and their beliefs. Participants can then click on the religions named on the side of the page to read a bit more about the belief system in terms of the basic elements and its history. This serves as a great introduction for participants to see what religions their current beliefs seem to most closely mirror, as well as learn a little bit about those religions.

After locating this first resource, I wanted to find another way to test a student's current knowledge of other beliefs. The idea was to see just how much or how little a student could identify about various common religions in hopes that it would again spark an interest in them to learn more about them. I was able to locate a quiz developed by the Pew Research Center titled "US Religious Knowledge Quiz." This assessment is a short 15 questions that go through very basic elements of the world's major religions, as well as references prominent US figures and how they relate to certain belief systems. Once completed, the participant's percentage correct is displayed, as well as a declaration as to how those results compare with the results of a representative sample of the nation.

By utilizing both quizzes and the provided results, I felt that participants would have a good understanding of where their current ideology and religious knowledge fell, however, I wanted to be able to provide them with more information in case they took the bait and decided

to look into any of the results for themselves. For this purpose, I searched and found one more site that could provide students with more information on six major belief systems. This site, created and maintained by the Harvard Divinity School, displays a short summary of the six covered religions on the home page. Upon clicking one of the religions, visitors have the opportunity to read through a more extensive explanation of the religion, writings about the history, foundation, practices, and prominent leaders, as well as look through a glossary of important terminology used within the religion to make understanding it easier. This site, in conjunction with the other two, provided a solid ground for the beginnings of religious exploration and, in turn, satisfied my goals for how I wanted to encourage participants to begin to explore their personal religious beliefs.

The second major area that I wanted to focus on for this project was the topic of politics. Because politics can be such a sensitive subject for many people to talk about, and because it is really difficult to offer a truly unbiased description of the different parties and what in particular they believe, I knew that any site I could offer participants would likely just contain a quiz. The hope was to find something that could offer up various viewpoints to help on a variety of issues, and to display them in no particular order so that the participant could sort through them. The site I was able to locate for this portion of the program is called *I Side With*. This site satisfied my desire for this portion by having a thirty question quiz (you can elect to answer more questions to help it be more precise) that covers a wide spectrum of topics from abortion to capital punishment, to taxes, to government involvement. What I found particularly interesting and helpful from this site is that it goes through and shows you what presidential candidates for the upcoming election and past elections you most closely side with. It also shows you a breakdown

of your beliefs first question by question, and then topic by topic so that you can compare your personal ideals to the average voter as well as see where your opinions lie on the spectrum of agreement for each topic. By using *I Side With* in my thesis program, I would be able to provide participants with a great resource to not only visually see their beliefs, but to also see what other beliefs are out there.

The last major topic of discussion I wanted to make sure I touched on throughout this process was the idea of sexual expression and sexual preference. There is a stigma in our culture about talking too much about sex. I'm not talking about the sexual jokes or the sexual innuendos, but instead the seemingly real fear people have about sitting down and candidly talking about their sex lives. In a study done by E. Sandra Byers (2011), participants were asked about the duration of foreplay and sexual acts their partners enjoy. Their partners were then asked to answer said question about themselves. Shockingly, the findings were that seldom did the answers actually match up (Beyond the Birds and the Bees).

The lack of open dialogue surrounding sexual expression can lead to very embarrassing or potentially very compromising situations for individuals to get into. Without having a working understanding of one's own preferences and adamant dislikes, you could very easily get into a situation that makes you feel uncomfortable, or one in which you are pressured to do something you don't actually want to do. To combat that, I sought out a quiz that would offer a basic understanding of sexual acts and where an individual might fall in terms of how willing or unwilling they may be to try a specific action. This journey proved very difficult as there are plenty of resources on the web about sex, but very few were interactive in a way that was productive, constructive, and would give a person insight into their own tastes that they could

then investigate on their own. Through a colleague of mine I was pointed in the direction of the Kinsey Scale Test. This scale is a means to understanding where on the spectrum of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality a person may fall. The scale was created based off of concepts introduced in 1948 by Alfred Kinsey. These concepts were turned into a set of questions that give participants a numbered score with a brief explanation. The lower the number, the more towards heterosexual and the higher the number the more towards homosexual a person is on the scale. While this quiz does not provide a lot of feedback and explanation of the results, I did feel that it would give participants an understanding of which way they might lean, and in turn spark some curiosity into their own identity, especially if they have grown up thinking they were strictly one way, and their results showed something different.

After finding brief quizzes to cover the three major areas identified through research and self experience, I wanted to make sure I also created a way for participants to get to know their own personality as well. There are so many different ways of thinking and seeing the world, as well as reacting to it, and the reality is that your own personality plays a major part in painting your perception. Not knowing how you process information or interact with others can make it very difficult for you to make sense of what ideologies you agree with. As a freshman in college I knew very little of my own personality. I was a repetitive people pleaser, so I loved to just let other people decide my beliefs and strengths for me. When I finally got to college and was expected to have a grasp of what it was I think and what I believe is the right way of living, I was stumped. I had never had to learn about myself, and therefore had no idea about my own thoughts.

For this reason I knew I definitely wanted to include a few short quizzes that could help my participants understand a bit more of their natural behaviors and the science and research behind them. One of the most efficient quizzes in this department, when taking into consideration brevity and depth, is the Myers Briggs test. This personality assessment is a combination of questions centered around a person's thought processes. Not necessarily what they think, but how they think, and what drives them to do certain actions subconsciously. There are four main areas of the Myers Briggs test: Introversion versus Extroversion, Intuition versus Sensing, Thinking versus Feeling, and Perceiving versus Judging. This theory and test came about from Katharine Cook Briggs in 1943. She was amazed by how well her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers, got along with her soon to be husband, regardless of the fact that he seemed to process the world much differently than her and her family. This interest grew to passion and led to the categorization of these categories and the personality types created by them (OPP Ltd.).

Through my experience, particularly this year, with the Myers Briggs test, I have become very familiar with the differences of each of the categories and how they play into one another. To give a little context as to how the results of this assessment can be useful, we can look at my personality type: ENFP. The first category I tested into was E: Extroversion. This means that I tend to recharge through interaction with others. Sounds pretty straight forward, but where it really starts to come into play is if I start to become bogged down with a task or an issue at hand, it can be very detrimental for me to process something so emotionally draining by myself. Once you have a working understanding of this aspect and your need to either recharge with others or alone, you can start to plan ahead during stressful seasons of life. Knowledge of this caliber can

be instrumental in establishing and maintaining positive mental health, especially when going through the stress of entering college.

The other categories in my personality type give my similar information about myself only in various aspects of your identity. The N, which stands for intuition, means that I tend to perceive the world through less tactical avenues. Instead of entering a room and noticing its layout, I might enter a room and pick up on the collective emotion or feel that the room has. What type of environment is it in a more abstract sense. The F in my personality type indicates that I am lead more by emotion than order. For instance, if someone were to break a rule I had set, but for a good reason, I may still be lenient and not punish them for breaking the rule. However, someone who had received a score that fell under T (thinking) might be more inclined to show compassion for the person by teaching them the importance of sticking to the rules. The final category, Perceiving (P), indicated my level of planning and preemptive organization. A P personality type is more inclined to work in the moment, and less inclined to plan out actions ahead of time.

Learning and understanding my personality and how I process situations has been so instrumental in my own personal search of self identity. I have been able to better work on certain areas that frustrate me because I have an understanding for where I am currently at, and what it means to be at the place I want to be. This was the process I wanted to offer the participants in my program. By Including the Myers Briggs Personality Test, I felt I was providing students with the chance to explore inside their own mind. It is also very helpful that the test is accompanied by explanations and applications of the results in terms of careers, friendships, faults, and so on.

In addition to the Myers Briggs test I knew I wanted to provide residents with access Gary Chapman's Love language Assessment. This test has participants answer questions about what "action" they would prefer someone do for them. For instance: Would you prefer to come home after a hard day to a really sweet and encouraging note from your housemate or to them having surprised you with a clean house? This test gives participants a breakdown of which ways they enjoying receiving love the most. There are five categories set out for love languages: words of affirmation, physical touch, quality time, acts of service, and receiving gifts.

I came across this assessment in my sophomore year but started to actually study it and make use of it this year in my classes and in my personal life. The impact it has made for me has been drastic. Not only do I better understand how I receive love and why some actions mean more to me than others, but I can also ask about other people's love languages which allows me to be more cognizant of my actions in how I show them love and support. This assessment has radically changed my intentionality in how I interact with others and so including it in my thesis program only seemed appropriate.

After doing all of the research to find what quizzes I wanted to provide those who attended my program, I needed to find an easy way for them to access said quizzes. I decided to do this digitally by creating a website that would have links to the various tests and would have them categorized for easy access. To do this I used Weebly.com, a website builder site, and created *Journey to I AM* which is accessible at journey-to-i-am.weebly.com. I then created small handouts with the site URL on them to pass out to those who attended. The idea here was to create a resource that would serve as a hub for the information I was giving others. This way, if

someone ever wanted to access those links again, they would have my handout with the resource hub's URL on it. For a visual of the handouts see page 19.

Everything above encompassed the preparative work done to help attendees start their journey in discovering and solidifying their own self-identity. However, I knew that the tests by themselves would not be enough to draw people in and motivate them. I also wanted to give residents an opportunity to express themselves in a visual format. So the second part of my thesis program was a puzzle piece portrait.

The preparation for this portion of the program was fairly simple: buy a sturdy board and markers, print and cut out interlocking puzzle pieces on paper. However, the main goal here was not to create something tangible or to draw residents in, though it did achieve both of those things, but rather, the goal was to give the attendants at my program a chance to express themselves in a way other than words. By providing each person with their own puzzle piece, I explained that everyone is their own person and has their own individual identity, however, we also are members of communities and must function accordingly. By having them decorate a puzzle piece, and then link it with another piece on the board, I was able to demonstrate the idea behind knowing yourself and having your own identity, but then finding ways to connect your identity with others to create a beautiful masterpiece at the end. The final project has since been displayed in the DeHority Complex lobby as a reminder to passersby of their individual and contextual importance, as well as providing the information about the link to the various identity quizzes. A digital copy of the board can be found on page 20.

Overall, the process of conceptualizing, preparing, and hosting this program has been very rewarding. There were thirty attendees at the program and the statistics on my website say

that the site has been accessed 35 times since it was published on April 5th, 2018. Throughout the whole process I knew that I did not want to collect any of the test results from my participants in order to maintain their privacy as well as to encourage their honesty while taking them. I felt that this allowed for a more organic potential shift from taking quizzes as part of a program, to actually looking into different beliefs for your own personal reasons. The later of course being the goal of the thesis as a whole. I feel very blessed to have been able to conduct this program and to have found some really great sites and research that can assist those beginning their journey of self-identity.

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Appendices

Handout example:



